



A. CHEKHOV
BOYS





PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW



A. CHEKHOV
BOYS



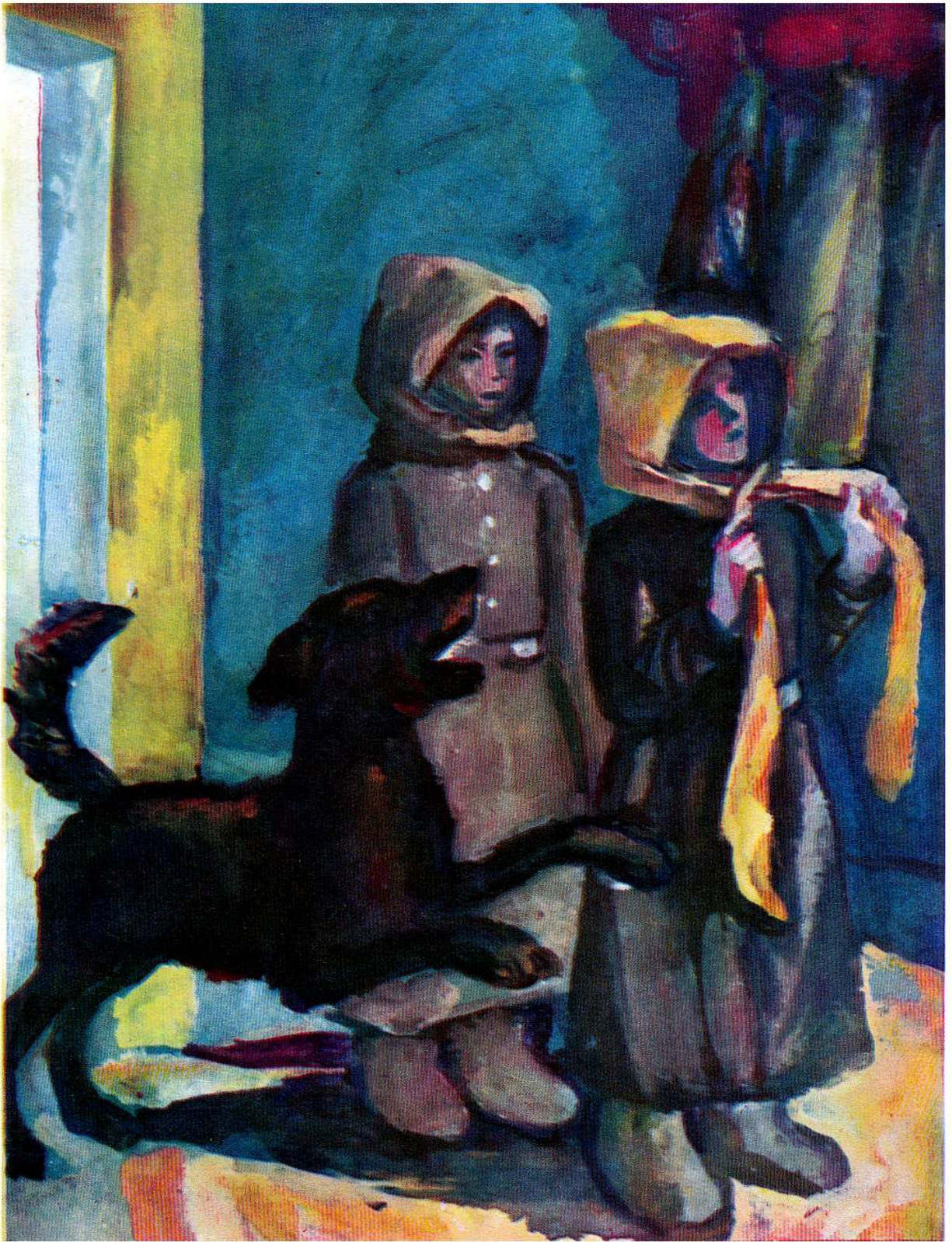
Translated from the Russian by *James Riordan*
Drawings by *Ruben Vardzigulyants*

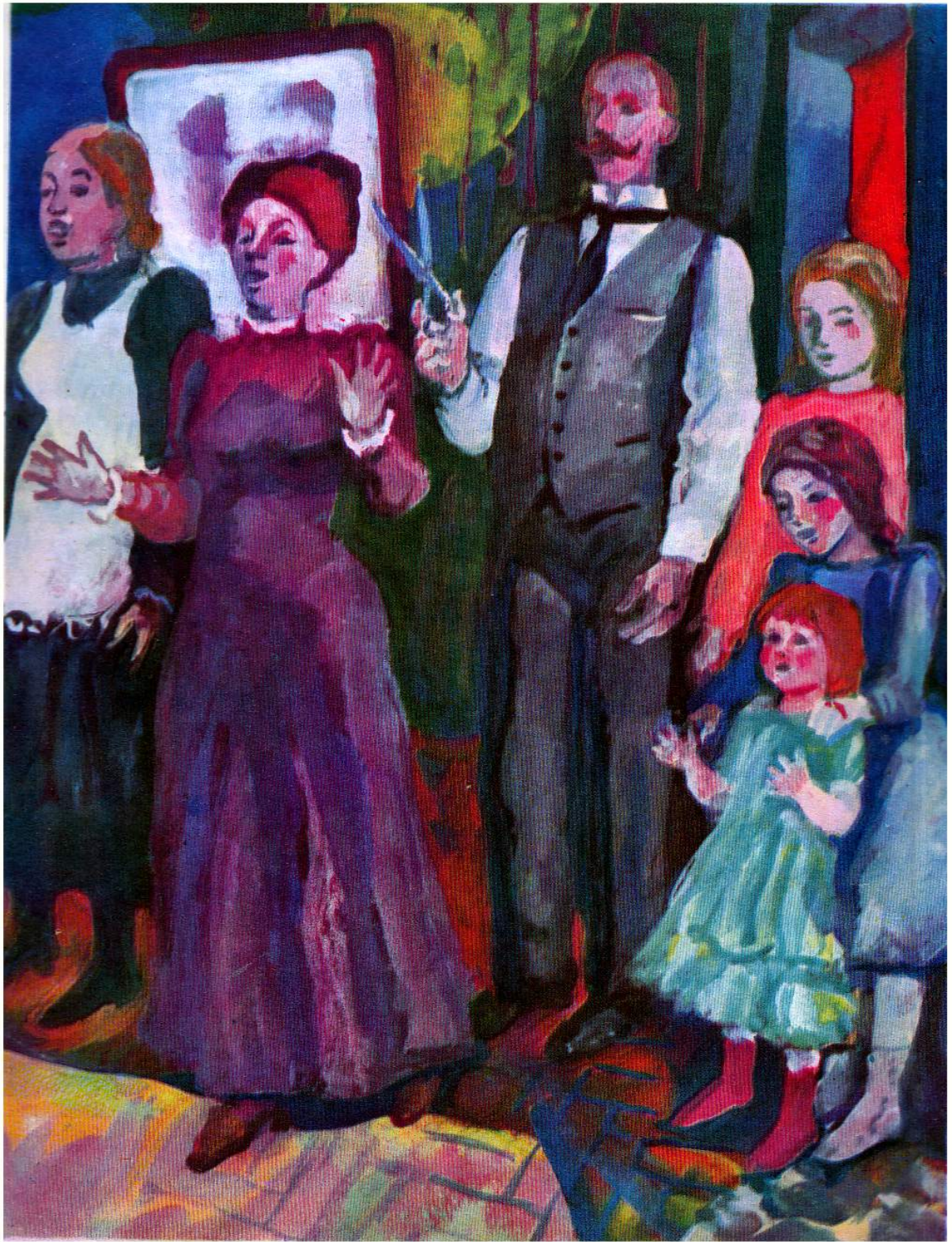


“Volodya’s here!” came a shout from the yard.

“Volodya’s arrived!” Natalya took up the cry running into the dining-room. “Oh, Good Gracious me!”

The entire Korolev family, who were expecting their Volodya at any hour, rushed to the windows. A low wide sledge stood at the entrance, a thick mist rising from the troika’s white horses. But the sledge was empty. Volodya was standing in the hallway untying his hood with red frozen fingers. His school coat, cap, galoshes and the hair on his temples were all covered in hoarfrost so that from head to toe





he emitted a pleasant frosty smell—just looking at him gave you the shivers: “Brrr!”

His mother and aunt rushed to hug and kiss him, Natalya fussed about his feet trying to pull off his felt boots, his sisters squealed with delight, the doors kept banging and creaking, and Volodya’s father, in shirt-sleeves, scissors in hand, came in, exclaiming in some agitation,

“We had expected you yesterday. How was the journey? Get here safe and sound? Dear me, dear me, give the lad a chance to greet his father! I am his father, don’t you know!”

“Woof, woof!” came the gruff bark of Milord, their huge black dog, pounding the walls and furniture with his tail.

Everything merged into a single confused joyous sound that continued for several minutes. When the first wave of joy had passed, however, the Korolevs noticed Volodya was not alone; another young fellow was standing in the hallway, wrapped up in scarves and hoods and covered in frost; he stood awkwardly in the corner, in the shadow of a big fox-fur coat.

“Volodya, who’s that?” whispered his mother.

“Oh,” Volodya suddenly recalled. “May I introduce my friend Lentilsin, of the second form at school.... I invited him to stay with us....”

“Pleased to meet you and welcome,” said Volodya’s father radiantly. “Do pardon my house-attire ... no frock-coat, you know. Natalya, help Mr. Lesterson off with his things. Dear me, dear me, someone take hold of that dog! Such a nuisance!”

Some time later, Volodya and his companion Lentilsin, stunned by the noisy welcome and still pink with cold, were sitting at table drinking tea. The winter sunshine, filtering through the snow and icy patterns on the window-panes, trembled on the samovar and bathed its pure rays in the tea-basin. The room was warm and the boys felt the warmth and the frost tingling together in their chilled bodies, each refusing the other’s command.

“So there we are, Christmas’ll soon be here,” sang out Volodya’s father rolling a cigarette from dark brown tobacco. “Though it seems only yesterday that summer was here and mother was in tears seeing you off to school. And here you are

again.... Time, my boy, passes so fast. Old age creeps up on you before you know it. Come now, Mr. Lemonson, eat up, don't be bashful! Make yourself at home."

Volodya's three sisters, Katya, Sonya and Masha—the eldest was eleven—sat at the table staring at the newcomer. Lentilsin was the same age and height as Volodya, but not as round and rosy—rather, he was skinny, dark and freckled. He had bristly hair, narrow eyes, thick lips—all in all, not a terribly good-looking chap. In fact, without his school jacket, you would have taken him for the son of a cook. He sat there in gloomy silence, not smiling once. The girls straight away made up their minds he was clever and scholarly. He seemed to be forever lost in thought, so that when he was asked a question, he would give a start, toss his head and "beg your pardon".

The girls observed that Volodya, too, usually so merry and talkative, had little to say, did not smile at all or even show he was glad to be home. Throughout tea, he spoke but once to his sisters—and then using strange words. Waving a finger at the samovar, he said,

"In California they drink gin instead of tea."

Volodya, too, seemed far away and, judging by the glances he occasionally exchanged with his friend Lentilsin, they shared the same thoughts.

After tea, everyone went into the nursery. Father and daughters sat round the table and renewed the work interrupted by the boys' arrival. They were busy making coloured paper flowers and a border for the Christmas tree. It was a noisy and absorbing job. Every newly-made flower the girls greeted with cries of triumph, sometimes dismay, as if each flower had fallen from heaven. Their father also murmured approval but now and again cast the scissors to the floor, scolding them for being blunt. Mother came bustling into the nursery with a worried frown and asked,

"Who's taken my scissors? Not you again, Ivan Nikolayevich?"

"Good Heavens, can't I have the scissors now!" exclaimed Ivan Nikolayevich in hurt tones and, throwing himself back in





his chair, he struck an offended pose—yet a minute or so later he was once more absorbed in his work.

On his previous visits, Volodya had helped with the Christmas decorations or had dashed into the yard to watch the coachman and shepherd making a slide. But this time he stayed close to his friend Lentilsin and ignored the coloured paper; not once did he pay a visit to the stables. The two boys just sat by the window whispering about something or other; then they spread out the geography atlas and pore over a map.

“Perm first...” said Lentilsin quietly, “from there to Tyumen ... on the Tomsk.... Then ... then ... to Kamchatka.... From there the Eskimoes will ferry us across the Bering Straits.... And we’re in America.... We’ll meet many wild beasts.”





"And California?" asked Volodya.

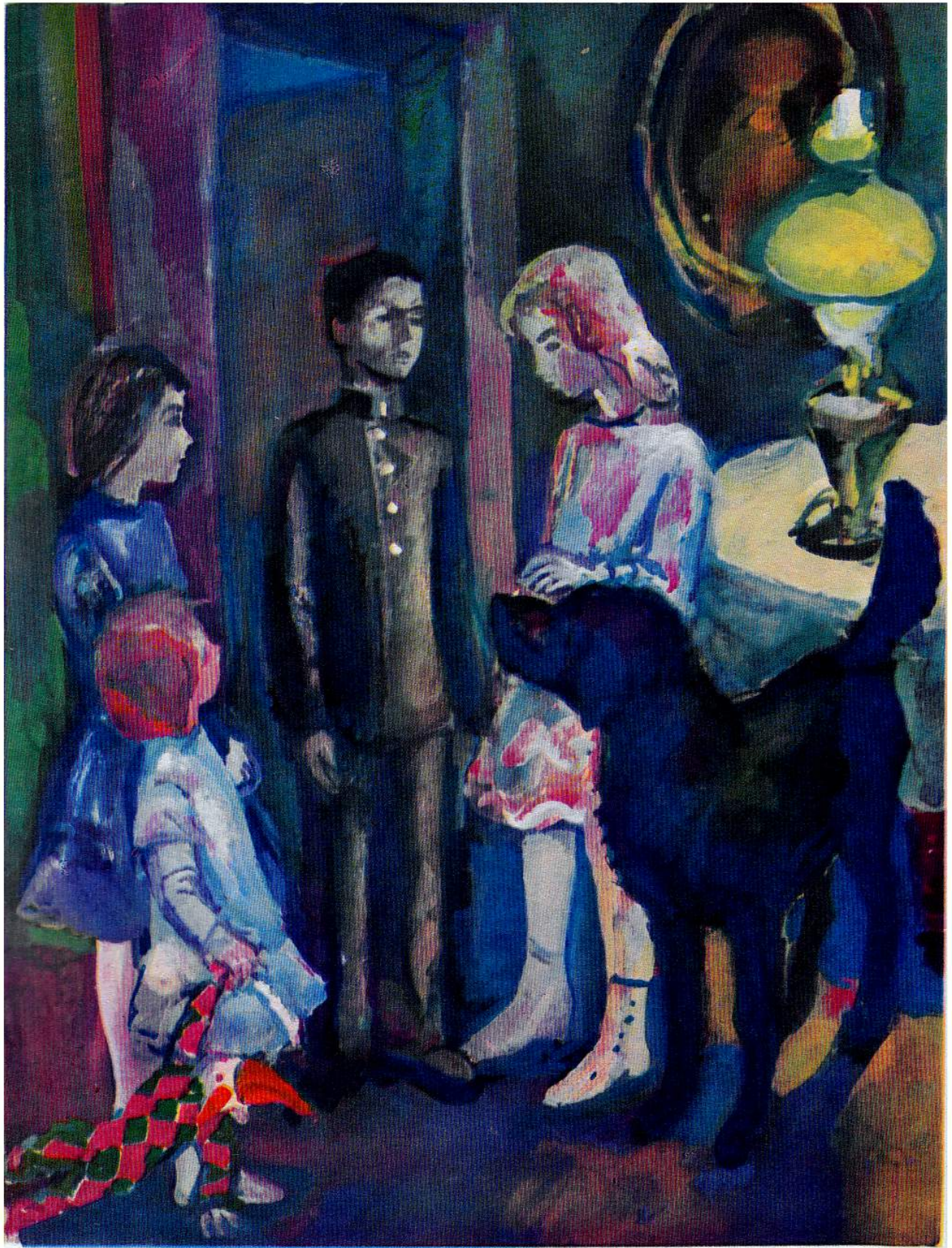
"California's lower down.... Once we've arrived in America, it's easy to get to California. We'll manage all right by raiding and hunting."

All day long Lentilsin ignored the girls, just giving them a sidelong glance every now and then. After tea, he found himself alone with them for a few minutes. It seemed indecent to remain silent, so he coughed loudly, wiped his right palm in his left hand, gazed sulkily at Katya and asked,

"Have you read Mayne Reid?"

"No, I haven't ... I say, can you skate?"

Burdened by his thoughts, Lentilsin made no answer to this question, only puffed out his cheeks and sighed as if he was hot. Once again he looked up at Katya and said,



"When a herd of bison stampedes across the pampas, it makes the earth tremble and scares the mustangs, making them kick and neigh."

He smiled sadly and added,

"And Indians attack trains. But worst of all are the mosquitoes and termites."

"What are they?" asked the girls.

"Rather like ants, only with wings. They sting you very badly. Do you know who I am?"

"Mr. Lentilsin."

"No. I am Hawk-Claw Montigomo, Chief of the Unconquerables."

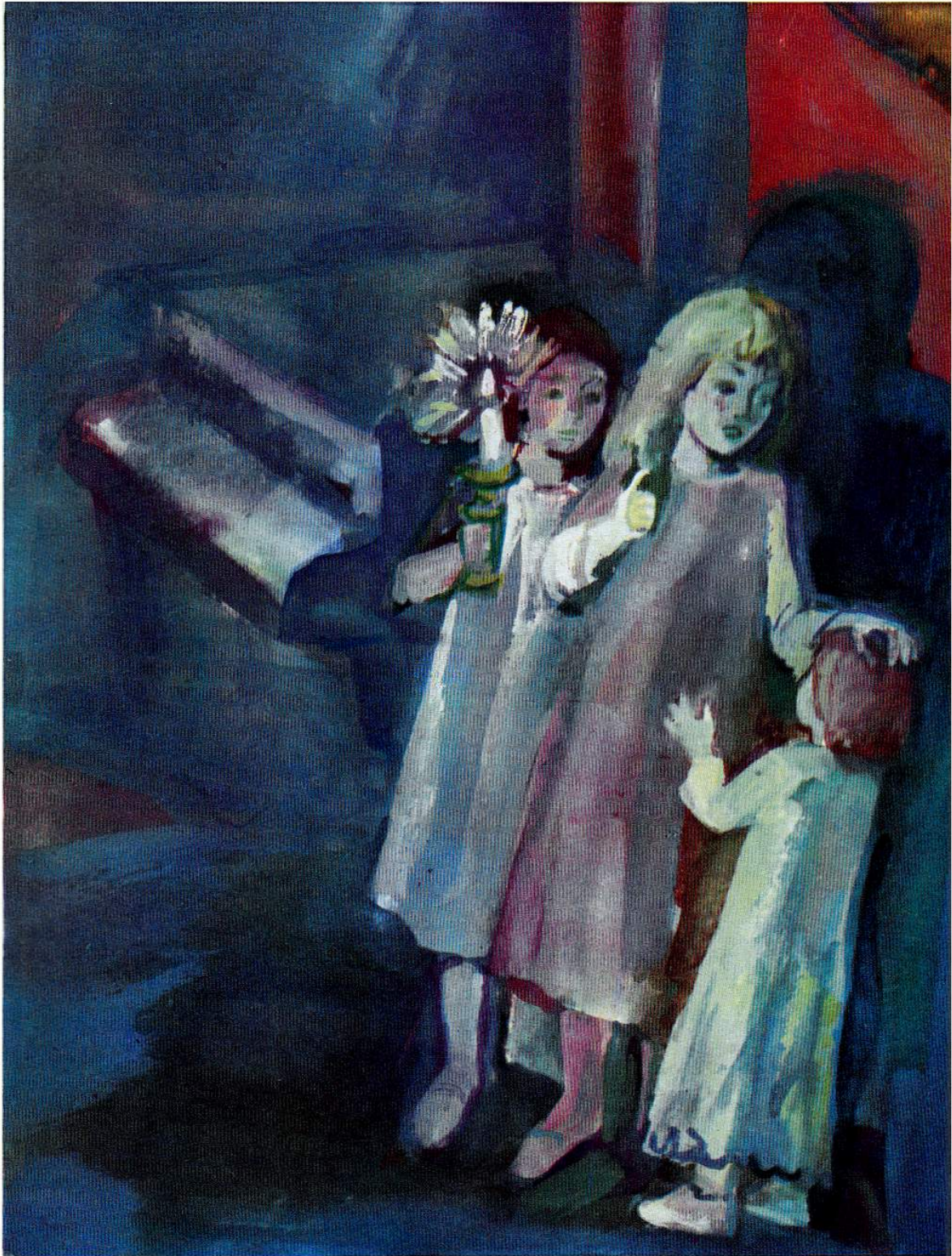
Masha, the youngest girl, stared at him, then at the window through which evening was already visible, and said absently,

"We ate lentils yesterday."

It was all strange and puzzling—the altogether baffling words of Lentilsin, him forever whispering with Volodya, Volodya not playing, just musing about something. It made the two elder girls, Katya and Sonya, decide to keep an eye on the boys. That evening, therefore, when the boys had gone to bed, the girls crept to their door and listened to the conversation. What secrets they learned! The boys were plotting to run away to America to hunt for gold; all was ready for the journey: a pistol, two knives, some rusks, a magnifying glass for making fire, a compass and four rubles in cash. The girls discovered the boys would have to walk several thousand miles, fight tigers and savages along the way, get the gold and ivory, kill their enemies, become sea pirates, drink gin, and end up by marrying beautiful ladies and owning big plantations. Volodya and Lentilsin chatted on, tumbling over each other's words. Lentilsin called himself "Hawk-Claw Montigomo" and Volodya "My Pale-Face Brother".

"See here, don't you go telling Mama," said Katya to Sonya as she sent her to bed. "Volodya will bring us back gold and ivory from America—and if you tell Mama, she won't let him go."

The day before Christmas Eve, Lentilsin spent the whole day examining the map of Asia and making notes, while Volodya





wandered about looking puffy and miserable, as if a bee had stung him; he shuffled morosely from room to room and refused to eat. And once, in the nursery, he even stood in front of the icon, crossed himself and said, "Lord, please forgive my sins. Lord, please look after my poor Mama."

Towards evening, he began to cry and, before going to bed, embraced his father, mother and sisters. Katya and Sonya understood, but the youngest girl, Masha, knew nothing, absolutely nothing, and it was only when she caught sight of Lentilsin that she murmured,

"When Lent comes, Nannie says we must eat lentils and peas."

Early on Christmas Eve, Katya and Sonya quietly slipped out of bed and went to see how the boys were going to run away to America. Creeping up to the door, they heard the boys talking,

"What do you mean, you aren't going?" Lentilsin was saying angrily. "Tell me, are you or are you not going?"

"Oh, dear," Volodya was weeping softly, "How can I go? How can I leave Mama?"

"Come, my pale-face brother, I beg of you, let us go. You vowed you'd go, even got me into it and now you're being a coward."

"I'm ... I'm not a coward, I'm just ... just sorry for Mama."

"Make up your mind; are you going or not?"

"I'll go, only ... only wait a bit. I want to spend a day or two at home first."

"In that case, I'll go alone," Lentilsin decided. "I'll manage without you. But it was you who wanted to go tiger-hunting, fight savages. So be it, give me back my pistons."

Volodya cried so bitterly his sisters could not help themselves and also wept softly. Then silence.

"So you're not going after all?" Lentilsin repeated finally.

"I ... I am going."

"Get dressed then!"

To persuade Volodya, Lentilsin praised America, roared like a tiger, pretended to be steamship, swore, promised to give Volodya all his ivory and all the lion and tiger skins.

That skinny, dark-skinned boy with the bristly hair and freckles had captured the girls' imagination; they thought him a hero, a resolute, fearless fellow. And he roared so well that, standing behind the door, you really thought it was a tiger or a lion.

When the girls returned to their room and were dressing, Katya spoke, her eyes filled with tears,

"Oh, dear, I'm so scared."

All was quiet and normal until two o'clock when the family sat down to lunch. But it was then they discovered the boys were missing. They had the servants' quarters and the stables searched, called out the steward to search the outbuildings—but the boys were not there.

The hunt extended to the village—but there was no sign of the boys. Tea was taken without them. And when the family sat down to supper, Mama was very worried, even cried. In the evening, they again went to the village and down to the river with their lanterns. What a to-do the boys had caused!

Next day the village policeman put in an appearance, and wrote out a form in the dining-room. Mama wept.

At that moment, a low wide sledge drew up outside, the steam swirling up from the troika's white horses.

"Volodya's here!" came a voice from the yard.

"Volodichka's arrived," Natalya took up the cry running into the dining-room.

And Milord started his gruff barking.

It seems the boys had been apprehended in town (they had gone there to ask where gun-powder was sold). No sooner did Volodya enter the hallway than he burst into tears and threw himself upon his mother's neck. The girls trembled, wondering fearfully what would happen: they heard their father take Volodya and Lentilsin into his study where he spoke to them for some time. Mama, too, spoke; and she cried.

"How could you do such a thing?" Papa was saying. "Pray God they don't hear about it at school or you'll be expelled. And you, Mr. Lentilsin, should be ashamed of yourself! Absolutely disgraceful, Sir! You are the instigator and, I trust,







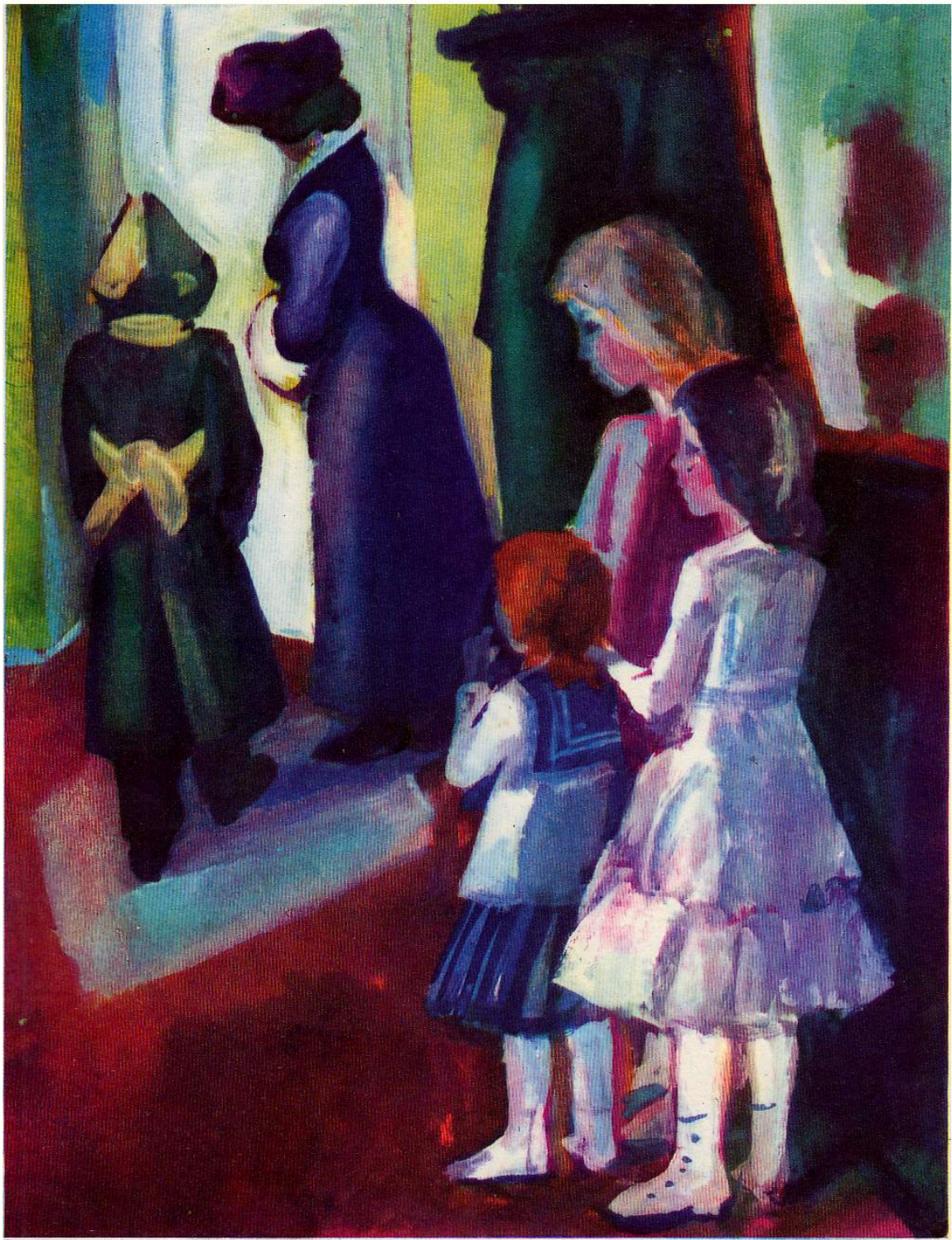
you will be punished by your parents. What made you do such a thing? Where did you spend the night?"

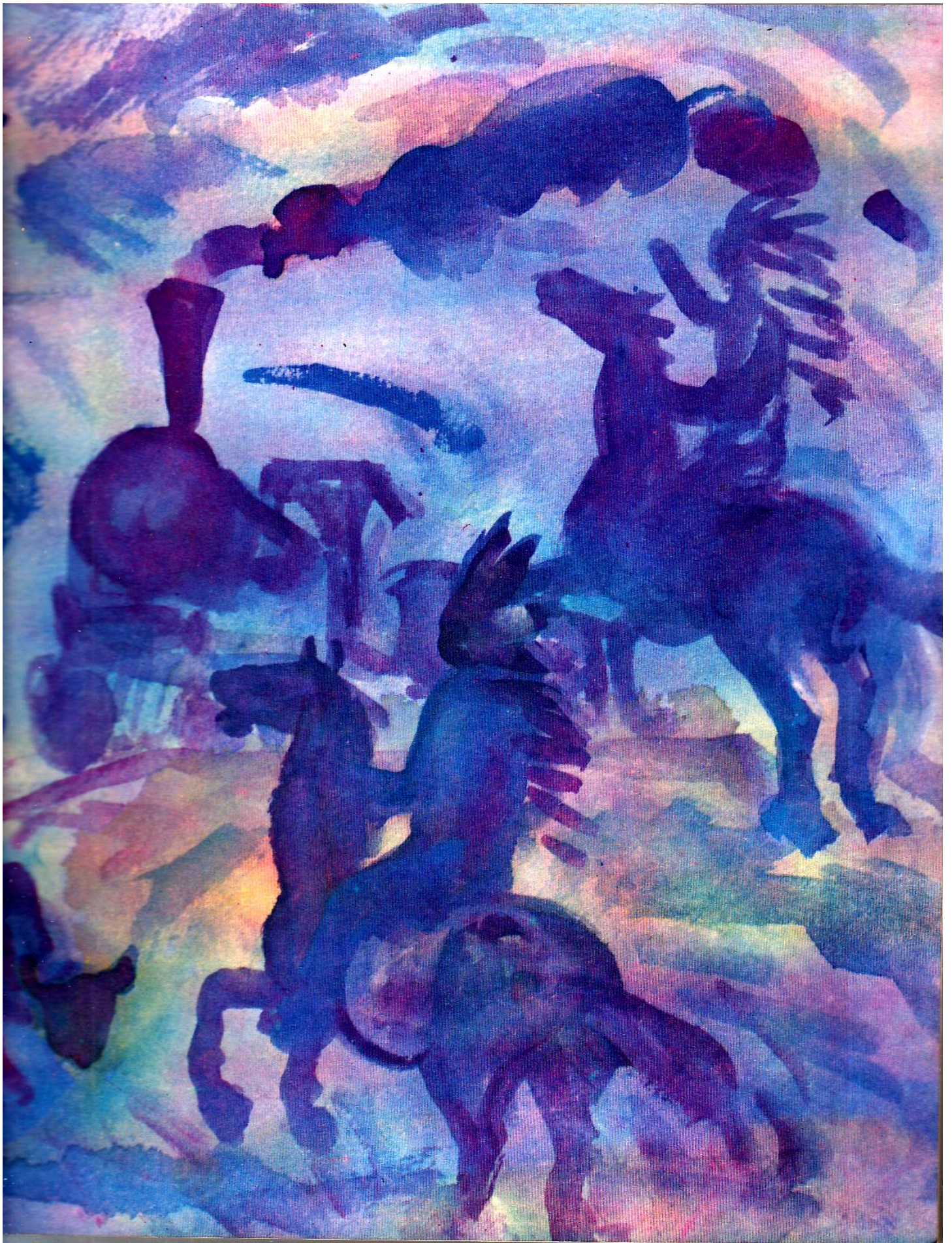
"At the station," replied Lentilsin proudly.

They put Volodya to bed with a vinegar-soaked cloth wrapped about his head. A telegram was despatched and, next day, a lady arrived, Lentilsin's mother, to take her son away.

When Lentilsin departed, he had a stern, haughty look on his face; he said not a word in parting to the girls. Instead, he took Katya's exercise book and signed his name:

HAWK-CLAW MONTIGOMO.





А. Чехов

Мальчики

На английском языке

English translation © Progress Publishers 1979. Illustrated



Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

x

+

2